



The Old Johnnie

1861 to 1865

Personal Reminiscences and
Experiences in the Confederate Army

by
James Dinkins
An "Old Johnnie"

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by James Dinkins

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DEDICATION



To the memory of the gallant spirits who fell in defense of the Lost Cause, to their surviving comrades, and to their wives and daughters, this volume of reminiscences is affectionately inscribed by the Author.

Fair Freedom is sadly and silently weeping
O'er Martyrs who dared for her honor to die,
But myriads of Angels are sacredly keeping
Unslumbering war o'er the spot where they lie.
Rest, Comrades! the tumult of battle shall never
Break in on your dreams, nor disturb your repose;
Your valor and names shall be cherished, and even
In high honor held, 'till time's records close.

– Simmons.

PREFACE



The papers comprising this volume were begun without any plan or purpose of writing a book or of publishing them in pamphlet or any other form. They were written as opportunity permitted, in the intervals that could be spared from the duties of active business, and without any attempt at elaboration. I had entered the Confederate army when a mere lad, barely sixteen years of age; was in the first battle of the war and in very nearly the last, and when the “Bonnie Blue Flag” was furled after the surrender of Generals Lee and Johnston, I gave my parole, along with my comrades at Gainsville, Alabama, where General Dick Taylor surrendered the department in which I was then serving. I had served through the entire war, from the beginning to the end, the first half in Virginia and Maryland, and the last in Mississippi, Tennessee and Alabama. Thirty years later I was impelled, not only by the suggestions of friends, but by my own feelings and inclinations, to commence writing my reminiscences of the war and my personal experiences during the more than four years of service, more as a record for my descendants and friends to read in after years, than with any view of coming before the public in the role of author. I knew then, as I now know, that sketches, papers, reminiscences and volumes, almost “*ad infinitum*,” had been written and published, until the reading people had become wearied, if not surfeited with that class of literature. With only my original purpose in view, therefore, I continued to write as time and opportunity permitted, and now and then in order to compare recollections, submitted a paper or two to some

comrade or friend in whose judgment I had confidence and upon whose memories I believed I could rely. Those to whom they were submitted were few, for I had no desire to make a public display of my simple narrative of the war, nor to give it any publicity whatever; yet, those friends and comrades who read the MSS. advised me with one accord, and some even urged me to continue and complete the sketches, and when completed, give them to the public in a volume, assuring me that they would be interesting to the public generally and specially so to all survivors of the lost cause and the descendants of those who had crossed over the river; they believed that the book would be valued by the living and the descendants of the dead who had served under Griffith, Barksdale, Forrest and Chalmers, or any where near them; and they were so flattering in their estimate, as to declare that it would be a valuable and reliable contribution to the history of the period extending from 1861 to 1865, although such a thought had never entered my mind. They believed, too, that people of the Northern States, from whose minds and hearts all bitterness had been obliterated, would read with interest truthful sketches from a Southern standpoint, of scenes and battles in which many of them had participated and of which they had heard and read.

Yielding to these opinions and representations of comrades and friends, I have endeavored to give my observations and experiences in plain and simple language, and to avoid any and every expression that might wound or offend, and in no instance to violate the laws of truth.

Reader! the result is before you; be your own judge of the merits of my work of love.

James Dinkins.

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PART I



The Little Confederate

CHAPTER ONE



The Little Confederate Enters a Military School – War is Declared – Hostilities Begin, and the First Battle is Fought

In April, 1860, a slender and apparently delicate youth was sent by his parents from Canton, Miss., to Charlotte, N. C., where he was matriculated in the North Carolina Military Institute. He reached there very near his fifteenth birthday. It was the first time in all his life that he had been more than a day's journey from his mother. The trip required several days, which afforded him opportunity for serious thought, and by the time he was entered as a cadet he was suffering the pangs of home-sickness, which only those who have had similar experiences can appreciate, but which can not be described. The second day after reaching the institute, he was notified by an officer (a cadet) to report to Major Hill, president of the institute, for examination and assignment to class. At eleven o'clock he was told to present himself, and proceeded to do so. At the end of a large section room sat a gentleman in uniform, with spectacles resting on the extreme end of his nose, the only use he seemed to have for them. This was Major Hill. His coat was buttoned, but the first button-hole extended above the chin, the first button being covered by the second button-hole. The boy was told to salute the Major as he approached.

“Well, sir, what is your name?”

“James Bleecker.”

“Well, what is your middle name?”

“I have no middle name – just James.”

“Well, sir, that settled, tell me what is an equation.”

The boy did not know. Then came the second question: “What is a rectangled triangle?”

He could not answer.

“Well, then, what is an hypothesis?”

He could not tell, so the Major told him to be sure to answer to his name at reveille next morning.

The boy returned to his room, having to pass several guards with bayonets fixed, walking their beats. Every thing tended to increase his loneliness and helplessness. He would fly if he could, but the guards would not let him pass out of the inclosure. The little fellow lay awake nearly all night, fearing he might not hear that drum-beat in the morning. He was down promptly, and fell in line at the foot, because he was the smallest and youngest, the roll was called, each boy answering to his name. There were several cadets with the same name. Bleecker, H. H., Bleecker, H. B., and the name Bleecker, J. J., was called but no one answered. The boy, like the others, returned to his room for study until the drum tapped for breakfast.

The front windows of the building had heavy iron bars across them, and there was no exit except by the rear stoops and stairways, to reach which all passed through a long archway. Most of the cadets had passed in ahead of the youth and just as he turned in, up went his feet, and down went his body. He was a “Newy” and was being initiated; all those behind ran over him, stumbling as they passed. It was before dawn, and dark, and the little fellow had no idea who his enemies were. He reached his room, however, badly used up, and spent the hour before breakfast brushing, and changing his clothing. The drum summoned all into line, and they were marched to the mess hall, where an officer presided at each table, and no one was allowed to take a seat without command. All sat down together and all arose together. After the ranks were broken, and all were quietly seated in their rooms, a tap was heard at the boy’s door, which he opened, and there found a sergeant and two men with their guns at a carry.

The sergeant said: "I have orders to arrest you, sir, and take you to Major Hill."

"O Lord!" The boy thought his time had come. He wondered if his father had any conception of the situation. Reaching the Major's presence, that official asked: "Why were you not at roll call this morning?"

"I was there," answered the boy.

"Sergeant, did he answer to his name?"

"No, sir."

"Well, sir, why did you not answer to your name?"

"He did not call my name, sir; I was there, I declare I was there, but did not hear my name called."

"Call the roll, sergeant," ordered the Major. The sergeant began. When he reached Bleecker, J. J. —

"Stop, sir," said the Major. "Is that your name?"

"No, sir, my name is James Bleecker."

"But," said the Major, "you told me your name was 'Just James Bleecker.'"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, does not J. stand for Just?"

He had taken all these pains to play a joke, at which, however, he never smiled.

The little fellow now felt he had landed near the Inquisition, so he began to think over all the bad he had done in the past, and prepared to make amends in order to meet the dread future, which he argued was close at hand. He gave up even the faintest hope of ever seeing home again, and but for the numberless duties which he was called on to perform, might have become insane. He was careful to obey all the rules, and learn the lessons. Whenever a cadet passed a month without missing a lesson, or without receiving a demerit, he was credited with "minus a demerit," so if he should receive one, he would still be without a demerit, and thus days, and weeks, and months passed. At the end of six months the little fellow had a perfect report, and was minus six demerits.

During all this time he wrote his mother once a week, and received a letter from her each week in return. Those sweet let-

ters from his dear mother were always full of tender expressions of love and encouragement. Mother-like, she built air castles for her boy, and looked forward to the time when he would return in vacation the next year – thought she would be so proud of him, and wondered if other mothers loved their boys as she loved hers.

The little fellow bore the separation from his mother, only because he could not do otherwise. He had but one dream in the world, and this was the hope of seeing her once more.

Winter came on with its snow, and from the mountains came covered wagons, each drawn by four large fat horses, and filled with big red apples, chestnuts and other good things. The harness of each horse contained a number of little bells, the ringing of which gave notice of the coming of all these “goodies.” This was all new to the little cadet, for he had never seen much snow, and the chestnuts were entirely new to him. The jingle of those bells became sweet music to the students. When one of the wagons was allowed to enter the campus on Saturdays, it was an occasion of the greatest happiness.

The presidential election at this time was exciting the most intense interest. Mr. Lincoln was a candidate on the Republican ticket, while Stephen A. Douglas and Mr. Breckinridge were Democratic candidates, and Mr. Bell, that of the Whig party. So much excitement had taken possession of the cadets that very little advancement was made in the studies from this on. The little Mississippi cadet, who had learned the manual and field movements, found himself moving with the current. There was a division of sentiment in the school, but most of the cadets favored either Mr. Bell or one of the Democratic candidates. The election passed, and Mr. Lincoln was declared President. The secession feeling was gaining strongly, while the months passed. All kinds of stories of insurrections were circulated in the country, one having reached Major Hill that the Negroes would make an attempt to capture the arsenal at Charlotte, over which the cadets kept guard. Major Hill had served in the Mexican war, and felt no alarm, though he gave instructions for the disposition of each company in the event an attack was made. The excitement continued to increase.

Finally, the spring of 1861 found the country in a state of anxiety and uncertainty, the ultimate results of which shocked the world. The Southern States called conventions and seceded from the Federal Union and organized a separate government. War was declared, and a call for troops was made by each government. Major Hill determined to give his services to the Confederate cause and was authorized by the governor of North Carolina to raise a regiment. Men were instructed to rendezvous at Raleigh. Major Hill announced to the cadets that the school would close, and those who desired to enlist must obtain consent of their parents. The cadets, full of patriotism, and with the inspiration of youth, rushed to his banner. The little cadet from Mississippi caught the enthusiasm, but could not hope for permission to join the army. Every thing was said by the older cadets to stimulate him, and he determined to risk all and go too, and, just about a year from the time he left home, he presented a telegram to Major Hill from his father saying he could enlist. The Major was surprised at the consent, but made no further remark. (It is needless to state the message was a forgery. The little fellow gave one of the boys a gold breast pin to write it on a telegraph blank.) One hundred and ninety-two of the cadets followed to Raleigh, where they were put to work drilling the new soldiers.

Major Hill was elected Colonel; First Lieutenant C. C. Lee, who was commandant at the Institute, Lieutenant-Colonel; and Lieutenant Lane, Professor of Languages, Major of the First North Carolina regiment of six months' troops.

After spending two months in camp, drilling, the regiment was ordered to Yorktown, Va., and soon afterward fought the battle of Big Bethel. General B. F. Butler commanded the Federal forces, Colonel Hill, the Confederate, which consisted of the First North Carolina, 1,500 men, and the corps of Cadets, about 190 strong. This was the first battle of the war, though Fort Sumter had been captured some time previous. When Colonel Hill advanced on the enemy, Colonel Lee remained in the rear with the Cadets deployed, and occupying as wide a front as the regiment. The line advanced in perfect order until Butler opened fire, when it began to give way. Colonel Hill rushed to the front, calling on

the men to be steady. I am satisfied it was the only time during the war he ever became excited. Lieutenant-Colonel Lee saw the situation, and called the Cadets to attention. He realized that every thing depended on their behavior, and he counted largely on the military training he had given them to overcome the shock they had received in seeing the regiment giving away. The Cadets, like the First North Carolina, never had their mettle tested before, but they had the advantage of discipline and of implicit confidence in their officers. Every thing was lost unless the Cadets could check the advancing line of the enemy. Would they do so? Who could describe the anxiety of Colonel Hill and Lieutenant-Colonel Lee in those few moments. The character of the Southern soldiers must be made within the next five minutes!